

## NAMES AND EPITHETS OF KṚṢṆA IN THE *BHAGAVADGĪTĀ*

The variety of names, sobriquets and epithets is a well known characteristic of Sanskrit literature in general and of conversation in particular. Barring the first verse which is spoken by Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the only three speakers of the *Bhagavadgītā* are Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna and Sañjaya. A very interesting and important aspect of the study of this profound philosophical poem is the one concerning the names and epithets used by Arjuna and Sañjaya in addressing or referring to Kṛṣṇa. Names often conceal in themselves very useful historical information, and as such the importance of the study of the names of one who occupies a position of supremacy in the hearts of the majority of the people of India cannot be too greatly emphasised.

Kṛṣṇa, the name of the propounder of the philosophy of the *Bhagavadgītā*, is uttered by Arjuna and Sañjaya a dozen times in the *Bhagavadgītā*, thrice in Chapter I, once in Chapter V, thrice in Chapter VI, twice in Chapter XI, once in Chapter XVII, and twice in Chapter XVIII. Two of the appellations of Kṛṣṇa had practically assumed the force of names. One of them, Keśava, meaning one having luxuriant hair on the head, is uttered by Arjuna and Sañjaya seven times, once in Chapter I, once in Chapter II, once in Chapter III, once in Chapter X, once in Chapter XI, once in Chapter XIII and once in Chapter XVIII. The other appellation Govinda, meaning possessor of cows, borne by Kṛṣṇa in consequence of his having been brought up among cowherds, occurs only twice, being uttered once by Arjuna in Chapter I and once by Sañjaya in Chapter II.

Besides the three names, the *Bhagavadgītā* refers to Kṛṣṇa by his several well known epithets which can be divided into three categories. In the first category may be put his three patronymics. Kṛṣṇa was called Mādhava after an ancestor of his named Madhu, Vārṣṇeya after another ancestor named Vṛṣṇi and Vāsudeva after his father Vasudeva. Each of these patronymics of Kṛṣṇa occurs twice in the *Bhagavadgītā*,

Mādhava being uttered by Sañjaya and Arjuna in Chapter I, Vārṣṇeya by Arjuna once in Chapter I and once in Chapter III, and Vāsudeva by Sañjaya once in Chapter XI and once in Chapter XVIII.

Three of the epithets of Kṛṣṇa refer to his qualities as a warrior conquering all forms of evil. The first of these epithets is Janārdana, meaning destroyer of evil persons. It occurs six times in the *Bhagavadgītā*, being uttered by Arjuna thrice in Chapter I, once in Chapter III, once in Chapter X and once in Chapter XI. The other two epithets refer to his conquest of individual evildoers. The first of these is Madhusūdana, meaning slayer of Madhu, a wicked person bearing the same name as one of the ancestors of Kṛṣṇa. It occurs five times in the *Bhagavadgītā*, being uttered by Sañjaya once in Chapter II, and by Arjuna once in Chapter I, once in Chapter II, once in Chapter VI and once in Chapter VIII. The other epithet Keśinīśūdāna, meaning slayer of Keśin, occurs only once, being uttered by Arjuna in Chapter XVIII.

Two of the epithets of Kṛṣṇa refer to his moral qualities. One of these epithets is Hṛṣīkeśa, meaning-controller of senses. It occurs seven times in the *Bhagavadgītā*, being uttered by Sañjaya thrice in Chapter I and twice in Chapter II, and by Arjuna, once in Chapter VI and once in Chapter XVIII. The other epithet Acyuta, meaning one not deviating from righteousness or not yielding to passions, occurs only thrice, being uttered by Arjuna once in Chapter I, once in Chapter XI and once in Chapter XVIII.

Some words used for addressing Kṛṣṇa in the *Gītā* are merely descriptive of his qualities rather than epithets, for they can be used for any other person also having the same qualities. Since Kṛṣṇa was an adept in yoga he has five times been called *yogin*, *yogeśvara* or *mahāyogeśvara* (X,17; XI,4,9; XVIII,75,78). Like any other great warrior he has once been called *arīśūdāna* or slayer of enemies (II,4). One word indicative of physical excellence and strength has been used reciprocally by Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna for each other. This is the word *mahā-bāhu*, mighty-armed, used three times by Arjuna in addressing Kṛṣṇa (VI,38; XI,23; XVIII,1) but used many more times by Kṛṣṇa in addressing Arjuna. Because of his reverence for Kṛṣṇa as a great teacher, Arjuna has also addressed him twice as *prabhu*, Master or Lord (XI,4; XIV,21).

In Chapters VII to XII of the *Bhagavadgītā*, not only Kṛṣṇa himself throughout claims to be God, but Arjuna also wherever he addresses him (in Chapters VII, IX and XII he does not address Kṛṣṇa at all) does so by repeatedly using for him words signifying God or the Supreme Being. These words can be divided into different classes. To begin with, a number of words are the compounds of *puruṣa*, spirit. Thus Kṛṣṇa has thrice been addressed by Arjuna as *Puruṣottama*, the Supreme Spirit (VIII,1; X,15; XI,3), once as *Śāśvata Dīvyā Puruṣa*, Everlasting Divine Spirit (X,12), once as *Sanātana Puruṣa*, Eternal Spirit (XI,18) and once as *Purāṇa Puruṣa*, Ancient Spirit (XI,38). Some words

are the compounds of para or parama, supreme. Thus he has been called Para Brahma, Supreme Being (X,12), Para Dhāma, Supreme Abode (X,12), Parama Pavitra, Most Holy (X,12) and Parameśvara, Supreme Lord (XI,3). Several words are the compounds of deva, god. Thus he has not only been called Deva, Deity or God (XI,14, 15,45) but also as Ādi Deva, Primeval Deity (X,12; XI,38), Devadeva, God of gods (X,15; XI,13), Deveśa, Lord of gods (XI,25, 37,45), and Devavara, Best of gods (XI,31). A few of the words are the compounds of bhūta, being. Thus he has once been called Bhūtabhāvana, Source of beings (X,15) and once Bhūteśa, Lord of beings (X,15). Two of the words are compounds of jagat, world. Thus he has once been called Jagatpati, Ruler of the world (X,15) and thrice Jagannivāsa, Refuge of the world (XI,25, 37,45). Two of the words are compounds of viśva, all. Thus he has been called Viśveśvara, Ruler of all and Viśvarūpa, Omniform (XI,16). He has also been called Ananta, Infinite (XI,37) and Anantarūpa, of Infinite form (XI,38), besides being called Aja, Unborn and Vibhu, All pervading (X,12). Lastly he has once actually been addressed as Viṣṇu (XI,24).

As has been pointed out earlier, names often lend interesting historical information. It has long been recognized that the absence of some Purāṇic epithets of Kṛṣṇa, such as Gopīvallabha, Rādhāramaṇa and Giridhara among those occurring in the *Bhagavadgītā* indubitably proves that the myths on which the Purāṇic epithets are based were invented at a time much later than that of the composition of the *Bhagavadgītā*. There is, however, another aspect which has so far escaped the attention of scholars. Why is it that Arjuna addresses Kṛṣṇa by words signifying God, such as Puruṣottama or Parameśvara, only in the intervening six chapters of the *Bhagavadgītā* and not in the preceding or succeeding ones? Metrical considerations, of course, do not stand in the way of such a use, for Puruṣottama or Parameśvara could well have been used in place of Madhusūdana which occurs as may as four times in the earlier chapters. Even if it is said that Arjuna was not fully aware of the divine nature of Kṛṣṇa until the latter dwelt upon it at some length in Chapter VII, it does not solve the problem, for in that case he should have addressed Kṛṣṇa as God at least in the last six chapters. On the other hand, having expressed regret in verse 41 of Chapter XI for addressing by his mere name one whose divine nature he did not know before, Arjuna does not feel any compunction in again addressing him as Kṛṣṇa in verse 1 of Chapter XVII. The only inevitable conclusion is that the original *Bhagavadgītā* comprising the first six and the last a human teacher, and the intervening six chapters<sup>1</sup> besides a few spo-

1. It is precisely in one of these chapters (IX,32) that not only Sūdras but even women and Vaiśyas are called PĀPAYONI, born of the womb of sin, whereas in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (V,10) the Vaiśyas are classed with Brāhmaṇas and Kṣatriyas as born of a pleasant womb, and women and Sūdras too are not included among those of a sinful womb. It is clear that Kṛṣṇa, if he is identical with Kṛṣṇa Devakīputra of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, could not have held the views attributed to him in *Bhagavadgītā*, IX,32.

six chapters was composed at a time when Kṛṣṇa was still regarded as a human being. The verses in the other chapters<sup>2</sup> were added after his deification. The time of the composition of the original *Bhagavadgītā* could not have been later than the fifth century B.C., for Kṛṣṇa was already deified in the fourth century B.C. according to the testimony of Megasthenes.

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2. See my article Additions and Interpolations in the *Bhagavadgītā* in EW, New Series, Vol. 27, Nos. 1-4, December 1977.